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Nicaragua policy furor

Congress, wary of 'Americanization' of covert tactics, seems likely to restrict aid, demand more accountability

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President Reagan's secret aid plans for Nicaraguan guerrillas have been slowed by congressional opposition. It is now possible that within weeks, the Congress will blow those plans completely out of the water.

The United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is reported to have suspended its mining of Nicaraguan harbors. Given the uproar in the Congress, it now seems unlikely to resume them.

Congressional specialists say that even if Congress agrees to continue funding CIA-backed guerrillas fighting in Nicaragua, it is likely to place tighter restrictions on how the money is used. Congress is also expected to demand fuller reporting to congressional intelligence committees on the supposedly secret operations.

But with Congress in recess, the legislative process is fraught with uncertainties. Perhaps the only certainty is that some form of Senate-House conference on covert aid will take place.

On April 5, the Senate approved an additional \$21 million for the Nicaraguan rebels. But the House is now in less of a mood to compromise on the issue. The Democrat-dominated House has voted twice along party lines to suspend aid to the Nicaraguan rebels. Also voting along party lines, the House Intelligence Committee on April 11 rejected President Reagan's request for additional aid.

The most-heavily publicized criticisms of the administration's handling of the CIA-sponsored mining operations have come from the leading Republican and leading Democrat on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Both have charged that they were not fully informed of the operations, as required by law. On

Sunday, Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a New York Democrat, resigned in protest from his position as vice-chairman of the committee.

The Republican committee chairman, Sen. Barry Goldwater of Arizona, in a now famous "Dear Bill" letter to CIA Director William J. Casey, denounced the mining of harbors as "an act violating international law" and "an act of war." Senator Goldwater told Mr. Casey that his guess was that the House of Representatives would defeat the administration's supplemental aid bill and that the Senate committee "will not be in any position to put up much of an argument after we were not given the information we were entitled to receive."

Congressional specialists on the House side tend to support Goldwater's statement. As one aide to a key Democrat put it, "The House will simply not go along with the Senate on this."

Where the disclosure of the controversial mining operations appears to have done the most damage to the administration is among senators and congressmen who only reluctantly went along with funding for the Nicaraguan rebels, or "contras," as they are often called. As a congressional aide put it, "Some people are going to start saying, 'Wait a minute. This far, and no farther.'"

Among those who had provided backing for "limited" covert operations was Sen. David F. Durenberger, a Minnesota

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